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In a Class by Themselves

A wave of homeschoolers has reached the Farm--students with unconventional training and few formal credentials. What have they got that Stanford wants? And how do admission officers spot it?



Photo: Glenn Matsumura

HIS WAY: Ross Hensley taught himself special-relativity physics at age 13.

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By Christine Foster

Michael Butler was never tardy to his high school homeroom. He never left an assignment in his locker. He never earned a disappointing grade--or any grade, for that matter. He didn't get a diploma.

He did, on the other hand, raise honeybees, train with an army and study modern Hebrew. And he managed to get into Stanford.

His unconventional education has been largely a solo journey, but Butler, '04, isn't alone. Together with at least eight others on the Farm and thousands more nationwide, he's part of a new demographic surge: young Americans schooled at home who are now going to college.

Homeschooling isn't new. History is full of self-starters who bypassed the classroom, sometimes with brilliant results: Edison left school at age 7 and was soon building chemistry sets in the cellar; Dickens picked up much of his knowledge on the streets. But the practice of parents teaching kids at home didn't draw much attention until the 1980s, when many fundamentalist

Christians, distressed by what they saw as declining academic rigor and a lack of moral guidance, began pulling their children from school. Homeschooling became a full-fledged movement, with its own publications, support networks and Internet curriculum providers.

No single organization tracks the numbers of homeschoolers nationwide, but using state-by-state data, the National Home Education Research Institute estimates that 1.3 million to 1.7 million students were educated at home last year--or roughly 1 in 33 school-aged children. Over the past decade, according to the institute, the number has risen by some 7 to 15 percent each year. It's unclear how many homeschoolers are currently of high school age, but according to the Educational Testing Service, 5,663 students who took the sat last year described themselves as homeschooled.

As a result of the movement's vocal--and still predominant--religious wing, many Americans continue to picture homeschooling as a mother and her children gathered around the kitchen table, alternating between a math workbook and a Bible. But an increasing number of families cite education, not religion, as their primary reason for abandoning conventional schools. These are parents who simply feel that neither public nor private schools will meet their kids' needs. They want the freedom to focus on each child's strengths and weaknesses and to let maturing students chart their own intellectual journeys.

Of course, there comes a point when even the most self-directed learner can use guidance from scholarly instructors. When high-achieving homeschoolers reach that threshold, many look to top-tier colleges and universities. In competing for admission, they want the same sort of academic recognition enjoyed by their more conventionally educated peers, even though they're short on formal credentials.

Among the nation's elite universities, Stanford has been one of the most eager to embrace them. Despite the uncertainties of admitting students with no transcripts or teacher recommendations, the University welcomes at least a handful every year. Stanford has found that the brightest homeschoolers bring a mix of unusual experiences, special motivation and intellectual independence that makes them a good bet to flourish on the Farm.

The University's special interest in these students originated, in large part, with a single admission officer. Jonathan Reider, '67, PhD '83, is a national expert on college-bound homeschoolers. He spent 15 years at Stanford as senior associate director of undergraduate admission and as a lecturer in the Structured Liberal Education program. Though he left the Farm last summer to direct college counseling at a San Francisco high school, his enthusiasm had spread and become institutionalized.

For the past two years, for instance, the University has tracked every application from a homeschooled student. These forms get flagged with a special code that lets reviewers find them among stacks of applications and helps admission officials chart emerging trends. Many top schools do not do this, including Harvard and Yale.

"I don't think anyone has caught on to the fact that these are such interesting kids," Reider says.

The latest Stanford numbers show a rise in homeschooler applications. In 1999, the first year of tracking, 15 applied. Four were admitted, and all four enrolled. In 2000, there were 35 applications, more than double the previous year's. Nine were accepted, and five, including Butler, started classes on the Farm this fall.

That's a tiny subgroup, just 0.2 percent of the applicant pool. So why is the University interested? Admission officers sum it up in two words: intellectual vitality.

It's hard to define, but they swear they know it when they see it. It's the spark, the passion, that sets the truly exceptional student--the one driven to pursue independent research and explore difficult concepts from a very early age--apart from your typical bright kid. Stanford wants students who have it.

Looking very closely at homeschoolers is one way to get more of those special minds, the admission office has discovered. As Reider explains it: "Homeschooled students may have a potential advantage over others in this, since they have consciously chosen and pursued an independent course of study."

Indeed, when he and his colleagues read applications last year, they gave the University's highest internal ranking for intellectual vitality to two of the nine homeschoolers admitted. And an astounding four homeschoolers earned the highest rating for math--something reserved for the top 1 to 2 percent of the applicant pool.

"The distinguishing factor is intellectual vitality," says Reider. "These kids have it, and everything they do is responding to it."

Does Stanford lure more of them than other elite schools? It's hard to tell when others don't keep the same statistics, but Reider has given the University a particularly high profile among families in the movement.

A popular speaker at homeschooling conferences, he has offered hundreds of families encouragement and advice on getting into college. In 1997, the magazine *Growing Without Schooling* published Reider's explanation of the University's requirements and his tips for homeschoolers seeking to apply. Written in the form of a letter to a Stanford hopeful, his article went to thousands of readers and has been passed from family to family. Today, homeschoolers who ask Stanford about its policies receive that letter as part of the reply.

When Reider talks to college-bound homeschoolers, he acknowledges the difficulties they face in completing the traditional forms. It's hard to sell yourself in a college application without grades or teachers to back you up.

"But wait," he joked at one conference in Sacramento, mimicking a hypothetical student. "My mom is putting together a transcript--I got an A in everything! I'm valedictorian!" The audience laughed.

Reider may tease, but this is the crux of the problem for application reviewers. In making sure a student has the right stuff for Stanford, "what we want is validation."

Stanford likes homeschoolers to get at least two of their three recommendations from non-family members--say, tutors, mentors, community college professors, or civic leaders they volunteered with--although a parent's letter will be considered. As for the missing transcripts, Reider wrote in his article: "This is actually not as serious a problem as you might expect, since there is not a great deal of difference between someone with no grades and someone with excellent grades but from a small, rural high school with which we are otherwise unfamiliar."

Whereas some state schools insist on seeing grades--prompting homeschoolers to cobble together course lists and rate their own performance--Stanford asks gradeless applicants to describe their curriculum in detail. The core of the application then becomes what the students write about themselves and their education. "We would like to hear about how the family chose homeschooling, how the learning was organized and what benefits (and costs, if any) they have derived," Reider wrote.

Standardized test scores also carry extra weight, although tests aren't decisive by themselves. In addition to the mandated SAT and ACT tests, the University urges homeschoolers to take some SAT II subject exams (formerly called achievement tests), even though these aren't required.

Overall, though, the University isn't forcing these kids through lots of extra hoops to prove themselves. Nor are other elite private schools, such as Harvard or MIT. But that's not always true of public universities. Ross Hensley, a current Stanford sophomore who scored perfect 800s on the three SAT II exams he took, says one of the schools he initially looked into, Georgia Tech, required homeschoolers to take eight of those tests. And Michael Butler decided not to apply to the UC system after discovering that every applicant must provide one of the following: an official high school transcript, evidence of success in community college courses, or a math/verbal SAT total of at least 1,400.

Stanford's current homeschoolers aren't the first to reach top-tier institutions. The poster children of the movement were the sons of Micki and David Colfax, two former teachers who raised their children on a goat farm in Northern California's

Mendocino County. During the 1980s, three Colfax boys headed off, in succession, to Harvard. Their admittance created a national media sensation.

The Colfaxes happened to live not far from Michael Butler's family. ("We bred our goat to theirs," he recalls.) "On some level, they had really validated homeschooling," says Butler's mom, Esther Baruch. "But I was not sure we had homeschooled the same way, so I didn't take it as evidence that Michael could get in." To cover the bases, he applied to 10 colleges. He was accepted by six and rejected by four, including Harvard.

Butler's schooling was shaped in part by where he lived. To get there, you start in the small city of Ukiah, drive an hour west toward the hamlet of Philo and then turn onto a dirt road. About three miles down, you turn off and go down a hill into a clearing in the redwoods, marked by two mobile homes connected by a porch. A proper supermarket is an hour up the road; the nearest high school is a half hour's drive. It's a place where homeschooling is vastly more convenient.

But conviction, more than convenience, is the reason Baruch kept her children at home. At age 16, she vowed that if she ever had kids, their education would differ from hers. Baruch attended a traditional Hebrew yeshiva in Brooklyn. "I was very much excited about learning, but there was not time to just learn for the love of learning," she says. "There was an hour [for each subject], and when it was up, the bell rang. That was it. Interested, not interested, awake, asleep--you moved on to the next thing."

Butler, in contrast, has followed his fancy, learning mainly by experience. His mother seized upon daily activities like cooking and gardening as educational opportunities. Butler and his siblings practiced math by dividing recipes in the kitchen; they devoured books on dinosaurs and mammals. Through an afternoon class offered at a local school, Butler got hooked on beekeeping.

Naturally, families vary in how they school their kids. Ross Hensley had a different experience--also self-styled, but decreasingly home-based.

His parents started homeschooling tentatively, as an experiment, when Hensley was in sixth grade. He had attended a local public school and two private schools, where he remembers feeling bored by the workbook assignments. "They just piled on pointless, easy work."

He took advantage of the freedom of homeschooling to push himself beyond anything regular schools might allow. At age 13, for example, Hensley got a textbook and dove into the physics of special relativity, even though he hadn't been taught the calculus that most teachers would consider a prerequisite. Leaving school at an early age, he says, "gave me a tremendous amount of time to pursue my interests in depth."

Later, he sought more formal instruction. The Houston native--who passed seven advanced-placement exams, including the tough calculus test when he was just a high school sophomore--spent most of his senior year at nearby Rice University doing college-sophomore-level coursework in math and electrical engineering. He attended a Stanford-run summer program for gifted high schoolers and took distance-learning courses over the Internet through Stanford's Educational Program for Gifted Youth. Add all that together and you get enough credits to enter the University with junior standing (although Hensley's social class is '03).

Among homeschoolers who end up at Stanford, "self-teaching" is a common thread. Parents usually teach in the early grades, assigning and correcting work, but later shift to a supervisory role, spending more time tracking down books and mentors. Stanford-bound homeschoolers typically take several college courses before they apply. The admission office encourages this, both to help with evaluation and to give students a taste of classroom learning before they arrive on the Farm.

A few, like Becca Hall, '03, pursue a free-form, follow-your-heart sort of home education known as "unschooling." During high school, Hall did an hour of math and an hour of writing each day, but filled the rest of her time doing crafts, taking nature hikes, apprenticing with an herbalist and studying labor history through old folk songs. Along the way, she picked up enough knowledge to earn a 1,480 on the sat (including a 750 out of 800 in math, a subject she once feared).

But a lifetime of "unschooling" can make it hard to embrace a structured institution like Stanford. Hall, who grew up near Seattle, says she's considering transferring to somewhere "more liberal," perhaps UC-Santa Cruz or Washington's Evergreen State. If she stays at Stanford, she will likely pursue an individualized major blending her interests in ecology and religious studies.

"It's definitely weird being in an institution now," the sophomore says. "I want to be able to pursue what I want. I want to be somewhere where it's okay if I don't want to follow the rules."

Hall's discomfort raises a worry often cited by critics of homeschooling. Can these students learn to live with the rules of the larger world? Are they properly socialized?

Parents say they can hear the socialization question coming before it's asked--and it clearly annoys them. (They even call it the "s" word.) "People always ask in this tone of voice that suggests they're the first to have thought of it," Baruch says. "I sometimes answer, 'Yes, I think the way schoolkids are socialized is a terrible thing; I don't know what to do about it.'" She dismisses fears that homeschoolers aren't well socialized. "I don't think [those worries] are borne out at all, in any way."

Backing her up is a 1999 survey organized by Brian Ray, president of the National Home Education Research Institute. Ray found that the typical homeschooler takes part in at least five social activities outside the home every week--from dance classes and sports teams to scout troops and community theater. He also collected previous findings by educators and psychologists suggesting that children taught at home are actually socially and emotionally healthier than those in schools. They are more comfortable interacting with adults and less likely to pin their self-esteem to the fads and whims of teenagers, Ray says.

The way these youngsters learn social skills--modeling themselves after adults rather than peers--is more consistent with the way children have been socialized through most of history, Esther Baruch asserts. "Until about a hundred years ago, the rich kids learned from adult tutors, and poor kids went to work early," she says. "Now, [kids in schools] model themselves after the other kids, who model themselves after tv characters--and the results of that are clear."

Homeschoolers tend to meet adults in the community during the day when they're out running errands, doing public service projects or seeking out mentors. Becca Hall, for one, is grateful for her friendships with adults. One of her closest confidantes is 35--"and that's fine," she says. "I also have younger friends. I think that is more healthy than every one of your friends being your age."

Rob Reich, a Stanford political scientist who has studied the homeschooling phenomenon, doesn't worry about socialization. Of more concern, in his view, is the risk of intellectual isolation. "One of the fundamental purposes of education should be to engage kids with ideas that are different from the ideas they encounter at home," he says. Intellectual isolation may be more prevalent, he says, when children's educations are shaped by religious dogma.

Reich, MA '98, PhD '98, who describes himself as a cautious supporter of homeschooling, has another reservation: the practice is essentially unregulated in much of the nation, and even where regulations do exist, families interpret them loosely. Each state decides whether parents need any sort of certification to teach their children and must file reports on student progress with their local school district. Most states require no certification, although a handful demand that the instructing parent have a high school or college education. In California, parents can either arrange an independent study for their children through the local district or submit documents to gain classification as a private school. The statute does not give local districts the right to disallow a homeschool program and does not require standardized testing of these students.

Reich has some qualms about parental qualifications. However, he adds, "there certainly are very competent people who don't have a college degree and don't have a high school degree." Instead of requiring a degree, he thinks local districts should assess parents' competence by reviewing the materials they would use to teach their kids. He also supports annual student testing to confirm that homeschoolers are progressing.

Even college students who thrived with homeschooling sometimes point to drawbacks. Hall and Hensley, after living in dorms for more than a year, are beginning to suspect they missed out on a few things. They had no high school prom. No passing notes in class. No football games. No lunchtime club meetings. None of the common vocabulary of the school experience that most Americans take for granted.

This can leave kids with a sense of separateness. "Ideally, homeschooling is a lot better than public school, but it can be easy to get lonely," Hall says. "You have to be willing to be weird, to not fit in."

"It worked great for me, but I'm not going to evangelize for it," says Hensley. "The conditions have to be very specific for homeschooling to work right."

Ginger Turner, '04, would argue that in her case, the right conditions--supportive parents, self-motivation and a thirst to pursue new interests--all fell into place. While Turner was homeschooling in Galveston, Texas, her parents logged thousands of miles chauffeuring her to activities--ballet classes, choir practice, a gig as a guide at a local historical site. "For me, homeschooling has always been about being out in the community," she says.

Turner, like others, has tried education both ways. When her public elementary school wouldn't let her skip first grade, her parents taught her at home for second and third. She went back to public school for fourth, fifth and sixth, then decided she'd rather be home again at the beginning of seventh grade. For the first three years of high school, she studied through a correspondence course offered by Texas Tech University. Then she spent her senior year taking classes at Texas A&M-Galveston.

Homeschooling sparked esoteric paths of inquiry, she says. Watching her younger brother struggle with a speech impediment, and then hearing her Salvadoran cousins speak Spanish, encouraged an early interest in linguistics--a field

most kids don't encounter before college. While researching on the web, Turner stumbled across work by Yale linguistics professor Abigail Kaun. Turner began corresponding with her, eventually auditing one of Kaun's courses online. "I've done so many things I wouldn't have been able to do if I'd been in regular school," Turner says. "It allowed me to maximize my potential and customize my education."

Of course, the real test for Turner and Butler is under way this fall as they adapt to a more structured academic environment and to the close quarters of dorm life. Hensley, Hall and others have paved the way—adjusting pretty well, both say, to the competition with other exceptional students and the daily interaction with professors. Because most homeschoolers have done significant college coursework before they arrive on the Farm, freshman year can be less a major change than another step in a continuum for them. As Hensley recalls it, "There was no real sense of a huge break from my prior life."


Linda Dobson, author of *Homeschoolers' Success Stories* (Prima Publishing, 2000) and news editor and columnist for *Home Education Magazine*, believes the very nature of homeschooling--requiring kids to be self-driven and to handle the details of their own education--can give these students an edge as freshmen. "It's not, 'I'm free now--I'm going to go to college and party,'" Dobson says. "These kids know what it's like to handle responsibility."

Despite that confidence, homeschooling families sense that their successes and failures will be watched. "Whatever we do, we are sort of pioneers," explains Esther Baruch. "This is the first good-sized wave, and you feel as though the movement sinks or swims with you. You don't want to let down the side."

Christine Foster is a Bay Area writer and a frequent contributor to STANFORD.

Comments (1)

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 your article. I think that mostly, the result of homeschooling depends on the family. Some students succeed in the teaching; others show bad results after a long time of home learning. Once my company Writersperhour.com did research about "Final Exams in Chicago, IL" and found very interesting statistic. That statistic shows that in 2013 - 79% of homeschoolers from Chicago, IL succeed in final exams, and just 67% of students who studied in University showed excellent results. So sometimes it might be better to learn at home. But I'm not a big fan of homeschooling, I think student need to participate in classes and communicate with other people his age. That's the only way to grow up a socialized person.

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